Banisteria, Number 7, 1996

Historical Records of the Trumpeter Swan in Virginia

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The earliest accounts of bird life in colonial Virginia often contained references to swans (or "swannes"). Mention of these birds in the 17th century as being found in present-day Virginia can be found in the writings of Thomas Studley (1607), John Smith (1608), William Strachey (1610), Thomas Glover (1676), John Banister (circa 1680 fide Ewan & Ewan 1970), and others. These writers, however, did not specifically identify the type of swan mentioned.

Writing about the birds in "Carolina" in 1709, John Lawson listed the species seen by him between 1700 and 1708. He wrote about swans: "we have two sorts; the one we call Trompeters; because of a sort of trompeting Noise they make...The [other] sort of Swans call'd Hoopers are the least." In the 1950s, W. L. McAtee made incisive studies of early North American bird records including those from North Carolina and Virginia (1955, 1956a,b). Among these early Virginia accounts was a letter by Rev. John Clayton in 1688 to the Royal Society of London. As "a parson with a scientific mind" (Berkeley & Berkeley 1965) and "the best bird observer who had reached the American colonies" (Stearns 1970), Clayton spent two years in Virginia (1684-1686), chiefly in the environs of Jamestown. His letter contained a section "Of the Birds" which listed the birds seen by him in Virginia. McAtee (1955, p.58), in his review of the Clayton letters, identified the "modern equivalents" of Clayton's "Wild Swans" as: "Two species, the whistling swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) and the trumpeter swan (*Cygnus buccinator*), then occurred in Virginia." (underline added)

The book entitled "William Byrd's Natural History of Virginia or The Newly Discovered Eden" contains references to swans. It was first published in German in 1737, then edited and translated from the German version by Richmond C. Beatty & William J. Mulloy (1940). These editors insisted (p. xxviii) that "This volume contains the most detailed account in existence of the natural history of colonial Virginia." In the book on p. 69 appears the following translated passages: "Two species of *swans* are found. One is called the trumpeter [swan], since it utters a sound like a trumpet. This is the largest sort. [It] comes there in winter in great flocks, and ordinarily stays several months in the fresh rivers.... The other species of swans are called hoopers, and are smaller."

P. G. Adams (1957) and other critics of this book compared "Byrd's Natural History of Virginia" with accounts in Lawson's "New Voyage to Carolina" (1709). The striking similarity in the language between the two accounts convinced Adams (1957, 1962) that the author of "Byrd's Natural History" had plagiarized Lawson. The current opinion is, despite the insistence of Beatty & Mulloy, that Samuel Jenner, and not William Byrd, was the principal if not sole author of "William Byrd's Natural History of Virginia," and that most of the natural history accounts (including swans) were taken and reworded from Lawson's book. Thus, references to swans in "Byrd's Natural History" pertained to North Carolina and not Virginia.

Another early account of swans in Virginia appears in Joseph Martin's gazetteer of Virginia (1835). In the section on "Alexandria" (pp. 483-484) is the following narrative: "The Swan is not found nearer than about 30 miles below Washington; at the mouth of Occoquan, on the right bank of the river is his highest feeding ground.... Here, and for some 30 or 40 miles below, this noble bird is seen floating near the

shores, in flocks of some two or three hundred, white as the driven snow, and from time to time, emitting fine sonorous and occasionally melodious songs, so loud that they may be heard on a still evening two or three miles; there are two kinds, so called from their respective notes–the one the trumpeter, and the other the slooper [hooper = whistling = tundra]; the trumpeter is the largest–and when at full size, will measure five to six feet from bill to the point of the toe, and from seven to eight feet from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other, when stretched and expanded. They are sagacious and wary, and depend more on the sight than on the sense of smell. On a neck nearly three feet in length, they are enabled to elevate their head so as to see and distinguish with a quick and penetrating eye objects at a great distance, and by means of this same length of neck they feed in slack tides, by immersing, as is their habit, nearly all of the body–and throwing only their feet and tails out, in three or four feet water, and on the flatty shores they frequent, generally beyond gun-shot;...the swan remain here the whole winter, only shifting their ground in severe weather from the frozen to the open part of the river, and dropping down into the salts where it is rarely frozen. They get into good condition soon after arrival in autumn, and remain fat until toward spring–when a few weeks before their departure about the first of March, they gradually become thinner in flesh...."

The mouth of the Occoquan River, Occoquan Bay, and Martin's "right bank of the river" south of Occoquan belong to Virginia. Therefore, some of the Trumpeter Swans mentioned by Martin were indeed in Virginia waters.

Other published reports of the Trumpeter Swan in Virginia have been less specific as to dates and places but provide additional information about the bird in the state.

(1) William Hornaday (1913) wrote (p. 20): "since that time [1900] Dr. Leonard C. Sanford procured two living birds from a bird dealer who obtained them on the coast of Virginia." Discounting that record, Murray (1952, p. 32) noted: "(The record in William T. Hornaday's *Vanishing Wild Life*, p. 20 of Two Trumpeter Swans, *Cygnus buccinator* Richardson, procured on the coast of Virginia by Dr. L. C. Sanford is an error. Dr. Frank M. Chapman checked the record for us and learned that the birds really came from Montana.)"

(2) The A.O.U. Check-list of 1957 (p. 60) contains the following statement for the Trumpeter Swan: "Formerly...on the Atlantic seaboard to North Carolina."

(3) In the only thorough, scientific study of the Trumpeter Swan, Winston Banko (1960, p. 20) remarked that "enough acceptable records are available from the states of ...Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina in the Atlantic flyway to demonstrate that the trumpeter still appeared as a migrant or winter resident in those states during the last half of the 19th century." A map on p. 26 shows the "former wintering range" to include southern New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, all of the Chesapeake Bay and mouths of major Virginia rivers.

(4) A map in Palmer's "Handbook of North American Birds" (1976, p. 61) is not substantially different from Banko's map. Palmer shows the "southern limits of former wintering" range of the Trumpeter Swan as extending as far south as North Carolina and Virginia.

(5) Frank Bellrose in his book on "Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America" (1976, p. 90) wrote that the Trumpeter Swan "... wintered on Chesapeake Bay and Currituck Sound [North Carolina], the lower Mississippi River valley...." His map on page 89, also similar to that of Banko, shows the "probable former wintering area" to include coastal sections of North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey, as well as virtually all of the Chesapeake Bay.

The evidence presented here, especially the first-hand observations of John Clayton and Joseph Martin's account, is sufficient to affirm the historical occurrence of the Trumpeter Swan in Virginia. Its disappearance as a winter visitor in the mid-Atlantic states over the last 100-150 years is lamentable; over-hunting has been suggested as a major cause. Perhaps this portion of the former winter range will be occupied again when and if breeding populations are re-established in mid-western or eastern North America.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Winston Banko, Harold Burgess, Harry Lumsden, William J. L. Sladen, and Roger B. Clapp for their comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

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